

Alexander Thomas Augusta—Physician, Teacher and Human Rights Activist

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Commissioned surgeon of colored volunteers, April 4, 1863, with the rank of Major. Commissioned regimental surgeon on the 7th Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops, October 2, 1863. Brevet Lieutenant Colonel of Volunteers, March 13, 1865, for faithful and meritorious services—mustered out October 13, 1866.

So reads the tombstone at Arlington National Cemetery of Alexander Thomas Augusta, the first black surgeon commissioned in the Union Army during the Civil War and the first black officer-rank soldier to be buried at Arlington Cemetery. He was also instrumental in founding the institutions that later became the hospital and medical college of Howard University and the National Medical Association.

Key words: Civil War medicine ■ African-American surgeons ■ historical figures

Alexander Thomas Augusta was born a free man on March 8, 1825, in Norfolk, VA. He learned to read secretly and by the 1840s moved to Baltimore, MD to begin studying medicine with private tutors while he worked as a barber. According to Dr. Montague Cobb, who has written one of the definitive articles on Augusta, “[h]e obtained his early education by stealth from [Episcopalian] Bishop Payne, as it was then against the law to teach colored persons.” Having also worked with Dr. William Gibson of the University of Pennsylvania and being denied admittance to the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania, Augusta moved to California to make money during the Gold Rush. He then moved to Philadelphia, PA and then to Canada, where he received his Bachelor of Medicine degree (with full honors) from Trinity Medical College of the University of Toronto in 1856, and making a life for himself and his wife. Augusta served as the university’s hospital director until he returned to the United States in 1862.

In January 1863, Augusta wrote a letter to Abraham Lincoln requesting appointment as a surgeon or physician for one of the black regiments formed by the Union Army. On April 14, 1863, Augusta was granted a surgeon’s commission in the Union Army. After Augusta received his commission, he was sent to Camp Barker in Washington, DC, and because he was commissioned as a major, several of the lower-ranking officers were confused as to how to deal with a higher-ranking officer.

Furthermore, because of Augusta’s race, bigotry cast a veil over all his dealings. In a letter to the secretary of war, James J. Ferree, the Commander of one of the DC Contraband Camps, stated:

Knowing that Dr. Augusta ranked as major and that I ranked only as Captain, I felt at a loss as to assign to duty an officer who ranked me. I referred him to Dr. C.B. Webster Surgeon in charge of the Contraband Camp Hospital who being a contract surgeon was embarrassed by the same consideration.

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Augusta stayed at Camp Barker from spring 1863 until the spring of 1864.

As already suggested, some of the “confusion” regarding Augusta’s commission had deep racial undertones. In early February 1864 at Camp Stanton, MD, where Augusta was senior surgeon, the white assistant surgeons under his command wrote to President Lincoln informing him of their “surprise” upon reporting to the regiment to find that the senior surgeon was a “Negro.” They requested “most respectfully yet earnestly” that a termination be put to this “unexpected, unusual and most unpleasant relationship in which we have been placed.” Their letter to the president said in pertinent part:

But we cannot ... willingly compromise what we consider a proper self-respect, nor do we deem that the interests of either the country or of the colored race, can demand this of us.

This was despite the fact that, in an order granting Augusta an eight-day leave on January 20, 1864, Brigadier General William Birney declared that “Surgeon Augusta has worked indefatigably” during his time at Camp Stanton.

Moreover, because of the times in which Augusta lived, he had frequent opportunities to display his dedication to the obliteration of discrimination, as Augusta often found himself confronted with blatant intolerance and bigotry.

In route to testify in a court martial on February 1, 1864, Augusta was delayed due to a trolley car incident. Documenting the reason for his lateness in a letter to the judge advocate, Augusta wrote: “I have the honor to report that I have been obstructed in getting to the court this morning by the conductor of Car No. 32 of the 14th Street line of the city railway.” Augusta went on to explain:

I ... hailed the car at the corner of 14th and I Streets. It ... stopped in front of me and when I attempted to enter, the conductor pulled me back and informed me that I must ride on the front ... as it was against the rules for colored persons to ride inside. I told him I would not ride on the front, and he said I should not ride at all. He then ejected me from the platform, and at the same time gave orders to the driver to go on. I have therefore been compelled to walk the distance in the mud and rain, and have also been delayed in my attendance upon the court.

Augusta also wrote a letter to the assistant secretary of war in which he reported:

Sir, I have the honor to report your request of

this date to forward to the Department an account of the outrage committed upon me by the Conductor of Car No. 32 of the City Railway Co., last week, has been received, and the following are the facts connected therewith: I had been summoned to attend a Court Martial as a witness in the case of Private [Taylor], who was charged with causing the death of a colored man last August, the said colored man having died in the hospital of which I was at the time in charge. I started from my lodgings at the corner of 14th and I Streets, on the morning of February 1st, for the purpose of proceeding to the hospital in order to obtain some notes relative to the case. As my time was short and it was raining very hard at the time, I hailed the car which was passing just as I came out of the door, and it was stopped for me; but as I was in the act of entering, the conductor informed me that I would have to ride on the front with the driver. I told him I would not, and asked him [if] I could not ride inside. He stated that it was against the rules for colored persons to ride inside. I attempted to enter the car, and he pulled me out and ejected me from the platform. The consequence was I had to walk the whole distance through rain and mud, and was considerably detained past the hour for my attendance at Court. On my arrival, I reported the case to the Court and the President, Col. J. H. Willets informed me that I must make my statement in writing. On the next morning I handed in my written statement and was informed on the adjournment of the Court that action had been taken in the matter, by forwarding my statement to the Adjutant General. There are persons living in the neighborhood who saw the transaction and who can corroborate my assertions. Trusting that something may speedily be done to remedy such evils as those we are now forced to submit to.

This incident was also described by Augusta’s mentee, Anderson Abbott:

One day [Augusta] being in a hurry to reach the court martial before which he had been summoned as an important witness boarded one of the Pen[n] Ave. Cars. The conductor at once proceeded to put him off. On reaching the Court, he made an explanation why he was late. The Judge Advocate ordered him to submit his statement in writing so he wrote a letter to Senator Sumner of Massachusetts who read it in the Senate. At that time, Washington

was not a municipality[;] it was a district entirely under government control. The question was debated in the Senate and an agitation was set on foot for the Abolishment of proscription. Separate cars were established for a time but finally the restriction was done away with altogether. And now the colored people of Washington enjoy the privilege of riding in the street when and where they like.

In his book, *The Negro's Civil War*, Princeton University's Civil War historian James McPherson summed up the positive results of that negative experience, saying: "Augusta's letter added a strong impetus to Sumner's antisegregation drive. Sumner read it into the Congressional Globe, and introduced a resolution instructing the senate District of Columbia Committee to frame a law barring street car discrimination in the district."

Finally, as with many African-American volunteers in the Union Army, Augusta had great difficulty collecting the salary commensurate with his rank. The paymaster in Baltimore, MD insisted that Augusta should be paid \$7 per month. This was vastly under what someone of Augusta's rank should have been paid. As he had done all of his life, Augusta stood up for his rights and fought for the pay due to him, rejecting the injustice of a lower salary. Following a letter from Senator Henry Wilson to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and an order from Stanton to the paymaster general, after 53 weeks, Major Augusta was compensated according to his rank. The American National Biography says simply that "[t]hroughout most of Augusta's war service, the army paid him at the level of an enlisted Negro soldier, despite the fact that he held the rank of major. This insult continued until Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts intervened on Augusta's behalf."

Augusta was seen by friends and foes as a fighter and champion for the rights of black Americans. As M. Dalcy Newby put it:

In his admiration of his mentor and colleague, Dr. Alexander T. Augusta, Abbott at the same time questioned the actions of Augusta when Augusta openly challenged a system which suppressed the advancement of his race.

* * *

Augusta had worked hard for his position in society, and although of Afro-American heritage and darker skinned than Abbott, he still insisted his freedom, not condescension or favour, should give him the rights accorded to

any other free citizen in the United States. He did not hesitate to challenge those who stood in his way.

From the fall of 1863 to the spring of 1864, Augusta was one of eight black doctors holding commissions in the Union Army, and he was placed in charge of what was then founded in D.C. as Freedmen's Hospital but later became part of Howard University Hospital. The American National Biography tells that "[f]ollowing the war [Augusta's] services were retained by the medical division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, where he served as an assistant surgeon responsible for the Freedmen's Hospital in Savannah, GA."

Still later, Augusta went on to become a faculty member of Howard University, where he served for nearly a decade: On September 21, 1868, when Augusta was appointed to the five-member medical faculty as a demonstrator of anatomy, he was the first African American to hold a faculty position at a medical school in the United States. Then, says the American National Biography, "[i]n 1877, after the medical faculty recommended to the trustees that Augusta switch positions with Dr. Daniel Lamb and become chair of material medica rather than anatomy, Augusta resigned and returned to private practice." Augusta also served as an attending surgeon to the Small-Pox Hospital in Washington, DC. He was awarded an honorary MD from Howard University in 1869 and an AM in 1871.

Ever the champion of the rights of African Americans, after being repeatedly denied admittance to various white medical societies, in 1884, Augusta became one of the founding members of the Medical Chirurgical Society, the first African-American medical society in the United States. Augusta is also credited by several historians with helping to found what would become the National Medical Association.

Augusta died on December 21, 1890, at age 65, and he was buried in Section One of Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. Augusta is primarily remembered today for being the first black surgeon in the Union Army and the first black officer-rank soldier to be buried at Arlington Cemetery.

His headstone recounts only the barest facts of his military career, not anything about the rest of his eventful life:

Commissioned surgeon of colored volunteers, April 4, 1863, with the rank of Major. Commissioned regimental surgeon of the 7th Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops, October 2, 1863. Brevet Lieutenant Colonel of Volunteers, March 13, 1865, for faithful and meritorious services—mustered out October 13, 1866.

In the words of the National Archives Workshop, "throughout his life, Dr. Alexander T. Augusta demonstrated the talent, courage and character to overcome racial barriers. He never allowed racism to go unredressed, and he was a model to all Americans for his perseverance and determination in the pursuit of equity."

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3. http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/2433/Alexander_Augusta_a_pioneering_doctor.
4. Cobb WM. Alexander Thomas Augusta, 1825-1890. *J Natl Med Assoc*. 1952;44:327-329.
5. http://www.websn.com/pride/pride/alexander_thomas_augusta.htm.
6. Cobb, op. cit. p. 327. Newby reported that Augusta was turned down for admission to medical school in Chicago as well as Philadelphia. Newby MD, Anderson Ruffin Abbott: *First Afro-Canadian Doctor*. Morley, TP, ed. Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside; 1998:34, quoting Morais HM. *International Library of Negro Life and History: The History of the Negro in Medicine*. New York, NY: Publishers Co., Inc.; 1967:36.
7. This advertisement appeared in a Toronto newspaper in 1855: "Central Medical Hall/ A.T. Augusta/ Begs to announce to his friends and the public generally that he has opened the store on Yonge St. one door south of Elm Street, with a new and choice selection of/ DRUGS, MEDICINES,/ patent medicines, perfumery/ dye, stuffs, etc./ and trusts, by strict attention to his business, to merit a share of their patronage./ Physicians' prescriptions accurately prepared/ leeches applied/ cupping, bleeding and teeth extracted./ The proprietor or a competent assistant,/ always in attendance." Hill GH. *Negroes in Toronto, 1793-1865*. Available at: <http://www.qesnrecit.qc.ca/mpages/unit4/u4p74.htm>; Lamb, op. cit., p. 110.
8. Mrs. M.O. Augusta was herself a dressmaker of note; while in Toronto, she was the only female black proprietress of her own shop, a "New Fancy Dry Goods and Dressmaking Establishment on York Street between Richmond and Adelaide, where will at all times be found the latest Paris and London patterns." Ibid.; Newby, op. cit., p. 78.
9. "I beg leave to apply to you for an appointment as surgeon to some of the coloured regiments, or as physician to some of the depots of 'freedmen.' I was compelled to leave my native country, and come to this on account of prejudice against colour, for the purpose of obtaining a knowledge of my profession; and having accomplished that object, at one of the principle educational institutions of this province I am now prepared to practice it, and would like to believe a position where I can be of use to my race."
10. On October 2, 1863, Augusta was appointed surgeon of the seventh U.S. Colored Troops, which was part of the expedition sent to Beaufort, South Carolina. Still later he was in charge of the hospital at Savannah, Georgia. Lamb, op. cit., p. 110.
11. Newby, op. cit., p. 60, citing Berlin I, Redy JP, Rowland LS, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867: Series 11, The Black Military Experience*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press; 1982:355-356.
12. Quarles B. *The Negro in the Civil War*. New York, NY: De Capo Press; 1989:204.
13. Quarles, *ibid*.
14. "Apparently the letter had effect for Dr. Augusta was placed on detached service examining Negro recruits at Benedict and Baltimore, Maryland throughout 1864, and at a recruiting service in the Department of the South thereafter until hostilities were terminated." Cobb, op. cit., p. 327.
15. National Archives—Collection of Alexander T. Augusta letters.
16. McPherson J. *The Negro's Civil War*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press; 1982:265.
17. Augusta to Capt. C. W. Clippington—February 1, 1864, printed in *Congressional Globe*, 38 Cong. 1 Sess.; 554; McPherson, op. cit., p. 265.
18. National Archives, op. cit.
19. Newby, op. cit., p. 163.
20. Charles Sumner was an antislavery senator from 1851 to 1874. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=S001068>.
21. That law was passed in March 1865. McPherson, op. cit., p. 266.
22. Quarles, op. cit., p. 204. "William Whiting, solicitor of the War Department, studied the Congressional Act of July 17, 1862, and concluded that persons of African descent were entitled to '\$10 per month and one ration daily, of which monthly pay \$3 per month may be in clothing.' At that time, white volunteers received \$13 in cash, free uniforms, and full rations." Garrison W. *Civil War Curiosities*. Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press; 1994:104 "The soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, made famous in the movie *Glory*, refused to accept any pay until they received pay commensurate with their white counterparts." Ibid., "As early as August 1862 Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton had promised black recruits the same pay as whites (\$13 per month, \$3 of which constituted a clothing allowance), but in 1863 War Department Solicitor William Whiting ruled that under the Militia Act of July 1862, blacks of all ranks were to be paid \$10 per month with \$3 withheld by the government for clothing. [In *The Negro in the American Rebellion*] Brown wrote that the men of the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Volunteers rightly believed that they had been recruited 'under false pretences,' and the men protested by not accepting wages lower than those of white troops (142). He admired the men of the Massachusetts regiments for refusing on principle to accept extra pay offered by Massachusetts to equalize their pay with whites. 'Standing by their expressed determination to have justice done them, they quietly performed their duties, only praying earnestly that every friend of theirs at the North would help the Government to see what a blot rests on its fair fame, -a betrayal of the trust reposed in them by the colored race' (145). Not until June 1864 did Congress finally equalize pay for black and white troops." Smith JD. <http://www.ohiou.edu/oupress/smithintro.pdf>. xxviii-xxix.
23. <http://www.anb.org/articles/12/12-00034-article.html>.
24. Newby, op. cit., p. 80.
25. Ibid.
26. Cobb, op. cit., p. 327.
27. <http://www.anb.org/articles/12/12-00034-article.html>.
28. Dr. Augusta taught "Practical Anatomy," "Descriptive and Surgical Anatomy," and "Descriptive Microscopical and Surgical Anatomy." He was also a "Clinical Lecturer on Diseases of the Skin." <http://www.huarchivesnet.howard.edu/0008huarnet/muse2.htm>.
29. <http://www.anb.org/articles/12/12-00034-article.html>.
30. Lamb, op. cit., p. 111.
31. <http://www.anb.org/articles/12/12-00034-article.html>.
32. "Even as an accomplished professor of medicine, Dr. Augusta encountered discrimination when he was denied acceptance to both the Medical Society of Washington, DC and the American Medical Association (AMA). Consequently, he and a protégé formed the National Medical Association (NMA). Unlike the AMA, the NMA had a nondiscriminatory membership policy." *Researching Black History at the National Archives: the Dr. Alexander T. Augusta Workshop*. Washington, DC: National Archives Tour Office; 1994. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Services publication SuDoc AE 1.102:H 62/4.
33. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/medtour/arlington.html>.
34. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=22770&pt=Alexander%20Augusta>.
35. *Researching Black history*, op. cit. ■